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Syria's Assad uses terror groups to stay as Mideast power broker

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On an October evening in 1983, Syrians gathered around television sets to watch a row of adolescent girls in military formation, all wearing the uniform of the ruling Baath ("Renaissance") Party militia. Around each girl's neck was draped a long snake which she stroked and

petted. Then, one after another, each girl bit off her snake's head and spat it away. Syrian President Hafez Assad, the guest of honor, looked on approvingly.

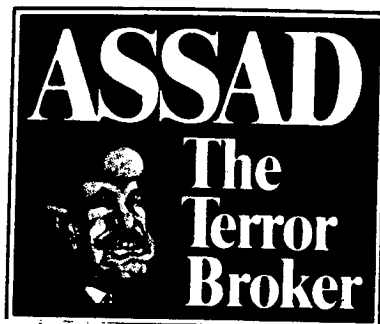
The staging of this scene tells much about how Mr. Assad has governed Syria since seizing power in a military coup in 1970. "The contrived brutality would give a citizen discontented with Assad's rule something to think about," says Daniel Pipes, a leading American student of Syrian affairs and professor of strategy at the U.S. Naval War College.

The snake-biting ritual in part explains the methods by which Mr. Assad operates, and the wily way he uses intimidation and propaganda as a political tool. The ritual was part of an event celebrating the 10th anni-

versary of the Yom Kippur war fought by Egypt and Syria against Israel in 1973.

In that conflict, as in all others between the Jewish state and Syria, Israel inflicted defeats on the Syrian forces that might have been expected to weaken Mr. Assad's rule or even topple him. It got within 25 miles of the Syrian capital of Damascus 1973, destroyed the entire Syrian anti-aircraft missile system on one June day in 1982, knocked out about 150 Syrian tanks and shot down almost 100 warplanes supplied to Syria by the Soviet Union.

But Mr. Assad doesn't topple so easily, and a decade after the Yom Kippur war he somehow has snatched a kind of victory from the jaws of defeat. "He says to the Syrian people, in effect, 'We may not have done too well, but we are steadfast; we are there in the fight against Israel,'" says Mr. Pipes.



According to Robert G. Neumann, former American ambassador to Saudi Arabia and now Middle East program director at the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Assad has emerged from years of isolation and placed himself at the power switch of Middle East policy. For some time to come, he will remain a man who cannot be ignored by anyone who seeks influence in the region."

Mr. Assad is a formidable presence on the world stage and even more formidable at home. He has demonstrated an ability to juggle the United States and the Soviet Union and to get his own way in the tangled affairs of Lebanon.

He also has shown that he will use whatever means are at his disposal to see that he gets his way. In international affairs, the evidence indicates that he is a prime sponsor and abettor of terrorism. Within Syria, he has massacred as many as 25,000 of his own countrymen in one town in one two-week period when faced with a challenge to his regime.

More recently, his peculiar shrewdness in global affairs brought home his name to the American public. It was Mr. Assad who arranged for the release of 39 hostages seized by Lebanese Shi'ites June 14 aboard a TWA flight from Athens, a role for which he was thanked by Mr. Reagan.

But according to a wide range of officials in the departments of State and Defense as well as in the White House, it also was Mr. Assad who has encouraged and actively supported the terrorist campaign against the United States and its citizens in the Middle East.

In attempting to eliminate the United States as an effective player in Lebanon, Mr. Assad has, Mr. Pipes believes, "demonstrated the success of terror as a foreign policy tool in the 1980s."

The most notorious instance was the suicide truck-bomb attack that killed 241 U.S. Marines on Oct. 23, 1983. A report on state-sponsored terrorism prepared for the Senate Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism states: "According to intelligence analysts, the two trucks used in the Oct. 23 bombing of the U.S. Marine headquarters in Beirut were rigged by Syrian professionals stationed in the Bekaa Valley and even driven into Beirut along a route guarded by Syrian militias."

White House sources report that American intelligence intercepted the names and ranks of the Syrian officers directly involved in preparing the blow.

In that case, as in the April 1983 suicide car-bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut that killed 63 people, Lebanese followers of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini claimed credit for both operations.

But intelligence officials in the United States and Europe say it was Mr. Assad who authorized the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to install themselves in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, and it is he who allows them to be kept supplied.

A Syrian officer, Sabah Noun, reportedly helped to coordinate the Lebanese Shi'ite campaign against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. A close watch is kept from West Beirut and the Bekaa Valley by Ghazi Kanaan, another Syrian officer skilled in the uses of terror.

Intelligence officials report that Mr. Kanaan was promoted from colonel to general for his role in the suicide attack against the U.S. Marine compound, when two five-ton trucks loaded with explosives triggered the unraveling of the entire Western position in Lebanon.

The threat of Syrian terrorism extends far beyond the borders of Lebanon. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Mr. Pipes points out, "Assad's control of terror is a major obstacle to leaders in other Arab countries pursuing policies inimical to his wishes."

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